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ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

Smt. Hansa Mehta

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SIG. (Hansa Mehta)

DATE 21.9.72

Bio-data

B. 3 July 1897 at Surat; was member, Bombay Municipal Schools Committee, 1926, President Bombay P.C.C., 1930; Gujarati Women's co-operative Society, Bombay, 1924-28, Bombay Provincial Primary Education Board, 1939-42; Fellow, Senate of Bombay University, Senate of Indian Women's University and its Syndicate Untd. 1948; 1931-46, Secy. National Council of Women, 1930.

Main points covered in the interview

Family background; in England (1919-21); Sarojini Naidu; Gandhi, Salt Satyagraha and participation of women; on Gandhi's leadership; Gandhi, Muslims and Jinnah; Nariman episode; Women's movement; Jawaharlal Nehru as a leader, as a writer, and as a parliamentarian; Nehru and Hindu Code Bill; Amrit Kaur; Sardar Patel; Kher.

Oral History Interview
with
Smt. Hansa Mehta
New Delhi, India
July 27, 1967
by
Shri K.P. Rungachary
Dr. H.D. Sharma
for The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library

Smt. Hansa Mehta: I was fortunate enough to be born in a family which had liberal ideas on all questions of life. My grand-father was a great reformer. He was born in 1833 and in those days, that was more or less a decadent period for our country, when people were steeped in superstition, when women had actually no place in the social life of the people or the country. My grand-father fought against those ideas and superstitions and he brought up his family in a way that he was known as "Sudharawala" - reformer. He was a teacher and known to all as master saheb. He started his life as a teacher, but later he became Diwan of many small States and also an administrator in many of the States. He educated his family, my father, my uncles received the highest education they could get. My younger uncle was even sent to England. He was the first Gujarati to pass the Indian Civil Service. My aunts were educated but did not receive higher education as there were no such facilities in those days. My father inherited the liberal ideas of his father and we were educated in the same way.

In my time women's education had not progressed much. When we passed Matriculation and joined college, my sister and myself and another girl, were

the only three girls in a class of 150 boys. From this you can realise that the girls' education had not advanced much in those days. Before we took our bachelor's degrees, there were about 3 or 4 other women in Gujarat who had taken it -- in Arts and Philosophy. I was myself a student of philosophy because my father was also a student of philosophy. He actually started his career as a Professor in the Baroda College and he was teaching philosophy. So it was very natural for us to take philosophy. Philosophy after all is a good discipline which broadens your mind. We also in a way inherited liberal ideas through - my father and grand-father. In those days to go abroad was considered irreligious. It was like going to 'Kalapani' and one had to perform 'prayashchit' penance for going abroad. When my uncle returned from abroad where he had gone for further education he was asked to perform prayashchit before the priests would perform his marriage ceremony. There was a great commotion when he refused to do so. The result was the caste split into two, the reformers and the orthodox. Many years later I married outside the caste. There was commotion at that time also, but people were not prepared to outcast the whole family, they simply outcasted me. But then I told them I was going out of the caste myself, as I did not believe in caste. I also went to England and there I met Mrs. Naidu - Sarojini Naidu -. Actually I had met her in 1913 when she came to Baroda to attend the marriage of one of the princes at a function specially arranged for

her. She recited some of her poems and I was very much impressed by her recital. I wanted to know more of her. I went to England in 1919. I was staying at the same place where she was staying, viz the Lyceum Club. So that is how we came together. She had come to England on a political mission. She was there to give evidence in connection with the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms. So she used to talk about politics. I also met Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpatrai and Mrs Besant at her place. Tilak died soon after in 1920. Thus in London I lived in a political atmosphere. I returned to India in 1921. Mrs. Naidu was living in Bombay at the time and she presented me a Khadi sari. Soon after my return to India Gandhiji was arrested and imprisoned at the Sabarmati Jail in Ahmedabad. That famous trial took place there. I also went there alongwith Smt. Naidu and other women. That was the first time I met Gandhiji in prison where Mrs. Naidu introduced me to him. I was very much moved by what he said. But I did not take to politics immediately. It was only in 1930 that I took to politics because the atmosphere in those days was such that one could hardly escape the infection. That is how I joined the national movement. I went to jail three times. I was also in the Congress Ministry in 1937 when we took office.

Interviewer: The main formative influence then was your home back-ground and politics came later on.

Smt. Mehta: My whole background was liberal. That was my formative stage.

Interviewer: After you returned from England, and before you entered politics, how would you explain that period?

Smt. Mehta: I returned in 1921. I again went to the United States in 1922. I was travelling all over the States. I wanted to study the educational system there. I visited a number of Universities.

My Professor who was in Baroda College told me that instead of going to England, I should have gone to the States because the Americans wanted to know a lot about us, they were very much interested. So I went there and visited a number of Universities. In 1923 I returned via Japan and was caught in that terrible earthquake on the 1st September 1923. I returned in October and I got married in 1924 January. My husband who was the chief medical officer in Baroda was appointed Dean of King Edward Medical Hospital and Seth Gordhandas Sunderdas Medical College in Bombay in 1925. So I settled in Bombay. Then I became a member of the Municipal Schools Committee in 1927 and I joined the national movement in 1930.

Interviewer: So your joining the movement as such was it due to any particular episode that precipitated it, or was it.....

Smt. Mehta: As I told you, I knew Mrs. Naidu. In those days, of course, I met her often. But I had no idea of taking part in the Salt Satyagraha because my children

were too young. But then Gandhiji invited women from all over the country to a place called Karadi on his way to Dandi, and a big meeting was held there. I was induced to go there. Gandhiji talked about picketing of foreign goods and liquor, and he said women can join this movement because it was not like Salt Satyagraha. Salt Satyagraha was breaking the law and was illegal, but picketing was not illegal and so he wanted women to do the picketing. We promised to do so and in Bombay we formed what was known as Desh Sevika Sangh which played a very important part in the movement. Our picketing of cloth shops in Bombay was so effective that the Government had to make picketing illegal. Some women dropped out because of domestic and other reasons. Well I was one of the leaders in that movement and I could not drop out. So naturally I continued. The Bombay Congress Committee used to have what is known as War Councils, and the War Councils used to appoint a President known as dictator. As soon as one President was imprisoned another one was appointed in his or her place. Mrs. Perin Captain who was the President of the War Council asked me to join the Congress so that she could appoint me after her. What I was already doing was illegal and so it made no difference whether I was a Deshsevika or joined Congress. But, I told her that I could not join immediately. I would just watch how the Council worked and join later. When she went to jail, she nominated Shri Dhirajlal Modi. He was arrested within a week. On that day I was made a Congress member - four anna member - and he nominated me as the President. I was President for nearly a month. We organised picketing and processions and what not. When I

was President, on the 1st August, we took out a huge procession - it was to celebrate Tilak Day - and the procession was banned in the Fort Area. We sat there the whole night under a pouring rain. The Working Committee was meeting in Bombay and the members also came and sat with us. In the morning Sardar Patel asked us women to go and change our clothes as we were thoroughly drenched. The Members of the Working Committee were then arrested during our absence and the procession was dispersed. Malviyaji was also there. I was then nominated a member of the Working Committee. The Committee met in Delhi at Dr. Ansari's place. All the members except Shrimati Kamala Nehru and myself were arrested. Soon after I returned to Bombay, where I was arrested the following day.

Interviewer: From the day you joined the Congress you started picketing.

Smt. Mehta: Yes, I started picketing before I joined Congress.

Interviewer: As you had explained, even women's education was not very popular in those days. And naturally, the number of women who took part in public life or entered politics was even less. And yet, a few years later after Gandhiji came and started his movement, they offered to come out for picketing. Political awareness among the women increased manifold. How do you explain the hold Gandhiji had over the minds of men and women, the masses?

Smt. Mehta: Gandhiji was going from village to village arousing the people and meeting the people. He

asked women whenever he went, to do picketing in numbers. There were hundreds of women who felt that they would like to do something for the country. The educated women too came forward. Uptil then women were living within the four walls of their home and did not have much interest outside their home. They came out as they thought they would be able to contribute something because Gandhiji had stated that everyone could contribute and it was not necessary for them to be highly educated. That was the real secret of his appeal. He could appeal to the masses, particularly to women because he was anxious that women should come out of their homes. He said that without women, he would not be able to do anything because it was a movement - non-violent movement- where women alone could be real soldiers.

Interviewer: You mean the leaders before never appealed in that way and they never tried to include women in the political movement.

Smt. Mehta: He was the first to do that.

Interviewer: That gave them a certain amount of importance.

Smt. Mehta: It was also because he could give them a programme. He gave picketing as his programme which women could do - picketing of liquor shops. That appealed to women in the villages. The programme appealed to them.

Interviewer: You have told me about the experience

in 1930 movement as to how you met Gandhiji and took part in picketing etc? In addition to this, you must have observed as to how the movement was progressing though you might not have taken part in all the activities. How would you assess the impact of that movement as compared to the previous non-cooperation movement? You might not have taken part in it but still you must have read or heard about it.

Smt. Mehta: Mahatma Gandhi was appealing to the masses even before 1930. But women had not come out in such large numbers in the previous movement.

Interviewer: That was a very important difference between the two movements.

Smt. Mehta: Yes, yes. When women came out in such a large number, he gave a programme of picketing which he had not done before.

Interviewer: That means, the extent of cooperation from the public was greater in 1930?

Smt. Mehta: It was much greater in 1930. It was so spontaneous. I remember I was the Congress President and the people used to come to the Congress House offering all sorts of things. They used to bring vegetables from the market. In fact we could get anything that we wanted for the volunteers for whom we had started camps. It was so spontaneous and so sincere.

Interviewer: What do you think, was the reaon? Was it that the hold of Gandhiji had become stronger? Or the

political awareness among the people had become stronger?

Smt. Mehta: Both became stronger because Gandhiji was working, appealing to the masses. The Congress was also in closer touch with the masses. The people became aware of their political status and so on.

Interviewer: It was a cumulative effect.

Smt. Mehta: It was a cumulative effect.

Interviewer: Now I am referring you to a particular incident. You were in Bombay and you were closely associated with the Congress politics at that time. Would you care to give us your own version of what is known as 'Nariman Episode'? What exactly was it? Various people tell various things about it. We would like to have your own version of it.

Smt. Mehta: Nariman, of course, was the President of the Congress. He was a very sincere worker and a good Congressman. He was a bachelor and I believe there were some irregularities in his private life. In those days people were very particular about these things. Sardar Patel was not quite satisfied with what he had come to know. I cannot give you the exact reasons.

Interviewer: You must have heard the public opinion about him.

Smt. Mehta: Sardar Patel was not keen on having Nariman as the Chief Minister of Bombay - the Prime

Minister as the designation was in those days. He wanted somebody who had the confidence of the people. Sardar Patel did not want Munshi either.

Interviewer: He did not want even Mr. Munshi.

Smt. Mehta: There was a difference between Munshi and Nariman. They both had conflicting views and were quarrelling in public with people taking sides and Sardar Patel did not like that. That was another reason why he chose a third person Mr. Kher, to become Chief Minister.

Interviewer: Do you think that the very desire for office went against these two people? And so they wanted somebody who did not really want to compete for it?

Smt. Mehta: Yes.

Interviewer: So, as various people are saying, Sardar Patel was so strong that in the circumstances then, he had to take a decision. It was nothing like a personal decision.

Smt. Mehta: I don't think so.

Interviewer: It was more a question as to who he would be able to win the largest votes.

Smt. Mehta: Not that. His desire was that the first Congress Government should be above reproach and have the confidence of all people.

Interviewer: After that, Mr. Kher took over.

Unfortunately it was only for a brief period.

Smt. Mehta: We were there for 2 years from 1937 to 1939.

Interviewer: In retrospect what do you think, they did in regard to education?

Smt. Mehta: At least I know being connected with education that we did quite a lot so far as education was concerned during the two years that we were in power.

Interviewer: Is it correct to believe that those who fought dedicatedly for freedom had no administrative experience? Was there not a sort of misgiving even among the Congress High Command to this experiment of provincial autonomy? The Governor had the powers, you had to rely on his promise not to use those powers. There was another problem: How whole heartedly and willingly would the British I.C.S. officials co-operate? These were fundamental problems. What was your experience?

Smt. Mehta: We had a very competent Ministry and we had very select people in the ministry and I can tell you that they commanded the respect of the Civil Servants also. The Civil Servants could not do anything they wanted to do. Of course there were some weak links in the chain. But the top men were really competent men and they had experience in various fields of work before they became politicians.

So the first Ministry, if I may say

so, really made a good impression.

Interviewer: It was a similar experience in some other States like Madras where the relationship between the Government and the Civil Service was very cordial. So they were able to give the best. What about the relationship with the Governor?

Smt. Mehta: We had Roger Lumely as the Governor. We met him when we were in London. He still remembered us. He was very friendly with Mr. Kher.

Interviewer: And there was no occasion for him to differ from the Government.

Smt. Mehta: Well, I cannot say off hand. The papers are not with me. But the social relations were very cordial. There was nothing wrong.

Interviewer: There was no occasion for any differences. Now coming to the Women's Movement you have been associated with it for a long time. In the early days, would you say that the Women's Movement helped the freedom struggle or you would put it the other way that the Women's Movement itself was an outcome of the Freedom Struggle?

Smt. Mehta: Well I cannot say that, because the All India Women's Conference was founded in 1927, that is, before the 1930 Movement. But the All India Women's Conference attracted the educated women. They were a group of dedicated

women, but still they belonged to the middle class, upper middle class and the educated class.

Interviewer: Intelligentsia.

Smt. Mehta: They also helped the 1930 Movement and vice-versa.

Interviewer: The All India Women's Conference, as it is called, has no political affiliation as a unit of the Congress or the Liberal Party?

Smt. Mehta: It is a non-political body. It is concerned with women's problems.

Interviewer: So you think the two went parallel. There was no question of a tie up between the two.

Before we came to the reminiscences there is one small question. By and large, India is considered conservative in its attitude to women's status and even in the Constitution special provision has been made with respect to women. Yet we have a larger percentage of women in public life, in Government, in services, than even in some of the advanced foreign countries. How do you explain this paradox? Is there any historical reason for this?

Smt. Mehta: Historical reasons, because from the beginning we have always considered woman as a competent person. 'Shakti' - she is always worshipped as 'Shakti'. Women in that way always had a place in life, in the public life. History tells of so many women who were not merely rulers

like Ahalyabhai Holkar, we have in Gujarat also Minaldevi. In ancient India women were not backward but later on because of lack of education, or perhaps because of circumstances their position went down. Now with this movement, Gandhiji's movement, women again came up. Gandhiji gave them so much importance; he said that they were his real soldiers, which gave them a sort of pride in what they were doing. It brought them out again.

Interviewer: You think it is a historical continuity.

Smt. Mehta: Yes.

Interviewer: Just before every general election there is so much talk of taking a larger number of women candidates, but nothing is done.

Smt. Mehta: Men are jealous. They are really jealous. They do not want women to come out. They feel that women can do something more than they can do. Women are more competent in some ways. Take Bombay there are so many competent women, yet you find the number of women in the Lok Sabha is very small. In the Parliament, there are no women from Bombay. I feel men are jealous. That is all I can say.

Interviewer: Why does not the All India Women's Conference take up the question?

Smt. Mehta: They are taking up the question.

Interviewer: Till the last minute they were saying that they were going to put up a larger percentage of women candidates but when the final list was out, there was a great disappointment.

Smt. Mehta: In fact there is a resolution of the Working Committee that at least 15% of the candidates should be women. They are not implementing it. They are disregarding that Resolution.

Interviewer: Now coming to your reminiscences, you must have come to know Panditji many years ago?

Smt. Mehta: Many years back. But actually I came in closer contact with him in 1947 when I was a Member of the Constituent Assembly. He was the Prime Minister. Since then I came in more contact with him.

Interviewer: It is very surprising when both of you were in the same national movement.

Smt. Mehta: I met him socially whenever he came to Bombay after 1930. But before that I had heard his name, although I had not met him personally.

Interviewer: Ever since you met him in 1947 at the time of the Constituent Assembly, would you like to trace your contacts with him?

Smt. Mehta: Well we used to attend the meetings. I was a member of the Fundamental Rights Committee also.

But I came in closer contact when he asked me to go to America in connection with the UN Human Rights Commission. He talked to me about it and asked me if I would go. Since then I used to keep him informed of what was happening. In 1948 I was a Member of the Parliamentary Delegation to England. He even asked me whether I would become Ambassador to Italy. I could not accept it because I did not want to leave India, then. In 1949-50 I left Delhi because I went to Baroda for the University work. I had to stay in Baroda. So the contacts became less from 1950 though I used to meet him when he came to Baroda in connection with function like the Science Congress held in the University. Once he came to inaugurate our Students' Week. Then he came to preside over the Science Congress which we had invited in Baroda. Then he came for the PEN's Conference. That way I used to meet him often.

Interviewer: Now to go back, both in the Constituent Assembly and the Legislature a man like Nehru dominated the national affairs so completely, I think he took keen interest in every aspect of constitution-making and parliamentary democracy. What particular subject impressed you as of greater importance in his calculation and in his thinking?

Smt. Mehta: Planning how to develop the country, make it more prosperous; that was one of his greatest aims and objects. But also social reconstruction, and there, the Hindu Code Bill was at that time before Parliament and we all looked upon Panditji to help us to get it through because there was a great deal of opposition to it. The

Hindu Code Bill was not very popular as one would think. Some of our Congress people themselves opposed it. So we had to get his full support. He supported it. He felt that this was something that had to be done.

Interviewer: Would you consider his emphasis on planning and social progress as his greatest contribution to contemporary history?

Smt. Mehta: Yes.

Interviewer: Because of his popularity and his unquestioned leadership, everybody followed whatever he suggested. But what do you think was the secret of his success as a leader of men? Was it his rationalism and logic and capacity to convince people or was it his charm and the sentimental attachment people had for him? What do you say?

Smt. Mehta: It was his personal charm and sentimental regard for him because he had sacrificed so much. He had gone to jail. People had that sentimental regard for him, and whatever he said was accepted by people without any question.

Interviewer: I am not at all inclined to belittle his greatness, but in his generation there was a very large number of people who made as great sacrifices.

Smt. Mehta: Yes. But then this personal charm was also there, his magnetism.

Interviewer: Did you get the impression that Gandhiji's

saying that he should be the leader after him had anything to do with that?

Smt. Mehta: Well, Gandhiji was a man who could judge people. And he felt that if there was to be an appeal to the mass of people it was Panditji who could do it and that is why he selected him as his successor.

Interviewer: Would you agree that he was one of the few leaders who was able to appeal both to the masses and the intelligentsia?

Smt. Mehta: Yes. That is the surprising part of it. He was an intellectual and he appealed to the intelligentsia, and also to the masses because he had personal charm.

Interviewer: You might have come into contact with him in 1947. You must have read his books ...... How would you place him as a writer?

Smt. Mehta: He was a very good writer. No doubt about it. But his 'Discovery of India', I think, was touching, moving. His choice of words was very good.

Interviewer: Even more popular and more touching than his Autobiography?

Smt. Mehta: Well, "Discovery of India", is also a sort of autobiography. Yes, I think so personally.

Interviewer: It is a question of personal liking. What do you think of him as a Parliamentarian?

Smt. Mehta: He was a very good Parliamentarian. He had got the knack of replying to questions and just killing the opposition. He was never an orator. Not an orator like Mrs. Naidu. But he could argue and he was a good speaker. He was a good Parliamentarian and he knew all the tactics. He could score a point. His greatest contribution was in setting up traditions and conventions of Parliamentary democracy.

But he was not a statesman. I won't call him a statesman or a great thinker in that sense. He was a great politician.

Interviewer: How would you make the difference between the two?

Smt. Mehta: A statesman is a good judge of people. I don't think Panditji was that. He could not judge people.

Interviewer: Sometimes he misjudged?

Smt. Mehta: Yes. Political vision he had. He was a politician.

Interviewer: One last question about Nehru. Some people say that at least during the later years, his popularity was so complete, that he did not like opposition.

Smt. Mehta: I think to some extent it is true that he did not like opposition or anybody differing from him. That was later on. John Matthai said he was a little dictatorial. You know Deshmukh resigned, and so on. It is true

that later people felt that he was a little more authoritarian. But one can understand that.

Interviewer: Do you recall an instance when before or after independence he gave a helping hand personally for the equality of women?

Smt. Mehta: He was one of those who helped in moving a Resolution at the Karachi Congress where women were given equality with men. He was partly responsible. Of course, Gandhiji was there. But he was also responsible for that.

Interviewer: Since then did he take an active interest?

Smt. Mehta: Yes, because he was the architect of modern India and in modern India he wanted women to play an important role.

Interviewer: When did you first meet Gandhiji? You mentioned that there was a meeting held at Karachi.

Smt. Mehta: No, the first time I saw him was in 1915 when he returned from South Africa. I happened to be in Bombay and attending the National Congress. He came and spoke. I have written in an article I wrote for the Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan's Journal that I was not impressed at that time because he spoke in a very low voice and then his dress was also peculiar turban and all that. No, he did not interest me then. Then I met him in 1921 in Sabarmati Jail. I have mentioned that in my article. But before that I saw him in Godhara. He presided over a conference at Godhara - Gujarat

Political conference - in 1917 and he shocked the orthodox people by saying that they should sit with the Harijans, there should be no separate enclosure for Harijans. He insisted on that. That was his first shock to the people. Then I met him in 1927, in Sabarmati jail. I was married in 1924 and my husband knew him very well, so I had occasion to meet him often after that.

In 1924 March he got an attack of appendicitis and he was operated upon in hospital in Poona. So, he sent for my husband and I also went, I met him at that time. After that, I used to meet him often. Whenever my husband used to go to him, I would also go.

Interviewer: Since then it has been a fairly continuous friendship with periodical meetings?

Smt. Mehta: Yes, because he was very often in Bombay.

Interviewer: So much has been said about Gandhi and so much has been written about him also. Summing up, what do you think was the chief characteristic of his leadership?

Smt. Mehta: He was sympathetic to people and to women. He attracted women. He would listen to their woes and to the woes of the people. All people felt that he was one of them. That was his contact with the people. And everyone confided in him because he was his friend. That was the great secret of his leadership.

Interviewer: A father figure to all?

Smt. Mehta: Yes.

Interviewer: Even to people who were older than him.

Smt. Mehta: To everybody irrespective of caste or religion. Everyone felt that he was a friend.

Interviewer: Was it because he was able to help them or he listened to them?

Smt. Mehta: He was not able to help always. But he would listen to them sympathetically. They felt that he was feeling sorry for them. There was a feeling of oneness which they all felt.

Interviewer: He was able to establish channels of communication. But that must be only with regard to a very small group of people who personally came into contact with him compared to the 400 million people of this country. What about others who never came into contact with him?

Smt. Mehta: He used to move about and address meetings so that people, the masses were always there. The contact was always there.

Interviewer: Not individually, but on a mass basis.

Smt. Mehta: Yes. Whatever he spoke, people felt as if he was echoing their own thoughts. That feeling was there. He was trying to find a solution for their woes and difficulties. That is what the people felt.

Interviewer: If he was echoing the thoughts of people, then where was his contribution by way of new thoughts. People are tradition-bound and superstition-bound.

Smt. Mehta: When I say that he echoed the people's thoughts, that does not mean that he followed their thoughts. People felt as if he was explaining their own thoughts to them. He always believed that there should be no underdog. He believed that Harijans were very badly treated and should not be treated in that way. He believed that women were treated badly and should not be treated like that. He spoke of these things so that he appealed to everyone who had grievances against society.

Interviewer: He was able to talk to them in their own language in an understandable manner. I do not think any thundering oration might have achieved the same purpose. Some people have felt that he was more a spiritual leader who had strayed into politics. Others say that he was a very astute politician who, understanding the psychology of the masses of India, used the spiritual language to win their support. Which do you think was true?

Smt. Mehta: Both. He was a spiritual man in the sense that he believed in truth and non-violence. But also he was a politician in the sense that he could understand how the mind of his opponents worked and therefore he could find out ways and means of meeting their points.

Interviewer: Once when somebody criticised him, he

did say: "I want to spiritualise politics". Do you think he succeeded in this?

Smt. Mehta: As far as he was concerned, yes. But I do not think the people have.

Interviewer: Not to the extent he had hoped.

Smt. Mehta: In fact politics have degenerated.

Interviewer: In retrospect, do you think it is possible to spiritualise politics?

Smt. Mehta: In 1930 one felt like that, because we were fighting a foreign power. And then sincerity was needed, honesty was needed and people had then both. But later these qualities disappeared. Gandhiji was also probably disillusioned because in 1942 when he started the Quit India Movement he was told that he would have to put up with all kinds of things. He was prepared to do it as a matter of fact.

Interviewer: To that extent he was a pragmatic politician. He had to take the people with him.

During the period of freedom struggle, he enunciated so many tenets with emphasis on boycotts, khadi and writing articles first in Young India and later on in Harijan. He was explaining them as the tools with which to fight the alien power. We are not going to fight them with guns. Do you think, if he had lived longer, he would have said: These are not the tenets which a free country should follow. They should be changed.

Smt. Mehta: I am sure he would have made changes. I am quite sure of it. The entire programme that he gave to the people was changing all the time. It was not something static. There was some reason for it. He had given his reasons. I have put it in my article that one need not accept everything that Gandhiji said at different times. Very often, he contradicted himself. But what we should follow in his case are the fundamental things, that he gave to people, such as brotherhood of man, nonviolence. We should accept only such things, and not everything that he said as gospel truth. It was all right for the time being. Circumstances at that time made him say so. But it need not be true for all time. That is where Gandhiji's followers make a mistake. They think that whatever he said was gospel truth and can not be changed, not even a comma.

Interviewer: About Gandhiji's leadership among the major part of the country there has been absolutely no doubt - even the few of his own followers who had differences with him - they were differences on points of technique or principle. But taken by and large the Muslims of India ceased to follow him after the first Khilafat movement days. What do you think it was due to? There were a few who followed him to the end.

Smt. Mehta: Well those who did not follow the leadership of Gandhi-Jinnah - for instance, Jinnah was a politician, a selfish man I call him because he was not concerned with the country as a whole but only for his community and naturally

community felt that they would gain more by not following Gandhiji because Gandhiji was all the time preaching Hindu-Muslim unity and the Muslims did not want to be merged into the Hindu community. They felt that if India was free, India being largely a Hindu country, the Muslims would have no voice at all. That was their fear and that fear made them see that they would not be able to follow Gandhi but would rather follow Jinnah. But on the whole there were many Muslims who had respect for him.

Interviewer: Even the people politically opposed to him.

Smt. Mehta: Except Jinnah.

Interviewer: Jinnah was a peculiar type of person; unique in his own way and he had his own faults perhaps. But do you think there was any truth, any valid reason, for this fear that they will get submerged in the majority?

Smt. Mehta: They felt - and probably Jinnah was responsible for that - that Gandhiji was a religious man, a Hindu. So far as the fight was concerned, of course, he was talking of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Interviewer: There may not be much truth but that fear was there. Was it on account of their not having their due rights recognised or that the Muslims may lose their identity as a separate community.

Smt. Mehta: That is what they feared. India having

a majority of Hindus they would lose their identity in the larger community. It was not so much against Gandhiji, but they did not like the whole trend. They wanted to keep their identity and so on.

Interviewer: Coming to the very last days were you - because you were a number of the Constituent Assembly - at Delhi at the time of Gandhiji murder?

Smt. Mehta: Yes, I was.

Interviewer: Since then you must have kept in touch with the various committees that have been appointed. There is a growing volume of evidence and opinion collecting that it could have been avoided. What is your own view?

Smt. Mehta: It is very difficult to say. But personally Gandhiji did not want any security arrangements to be made when he was having his mass prayer-meetings. It was difficult to do anything and I believe the Government also thought that there would not be anyone who would do any harm to Gandhiji. That feeling must have been there.

Interviewer: It is rather an incredible thing to believe that somebody may like to do him something. Now any kind of fanaticism is inexplicable and yet are you able to think of any reasons why some people could have felt so strongly against Gandhiji?

Smt. Mehta: Because they felt he was pro-Muslim.

Interviewer: But after partition they had their

own country and the Muslims were in India in a minority. What could they have done?

Smt. Mehta: Because they felt that Gandhiji was giving away so many things to Muslims. He practically forced the Government to give away Rs. 55 crores to Pakistan. It was Gandhiji's doing and therefore the orthodox people felt that as long as Gandhiji was there they would not have their own way. Their way was that they would make India a Hindu-country.

Interviewer: Did they really believe that Nehru will be a more amenable Hindu than Gandhiji?

Smt. Mehta: Well, Panditji was not a religious man. But Gandhiji was and they felt that he may do anything to please the Muslim Community.

Interviewer: As I said fanaticism is very inexplicable. We cannot understand it. You say, you have already spoken about Mrs. Naidu in that article. Would you like to say something about Amrit Kaur?

Smt. Mehta: Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, I knew her since 1931. I met her in Simla. That was in connection with the All India Women's Conference. She was the Chairman and I was one of the Members of the Committee. She had not then gone to Gandhiji as his Secretary. It was in 1932 or 1933 that she went to Gandhiji. So in 1931 I met her in connection with the Women's Conference and every year we were meeting. But when she became Gandhiji's Secretary there

was closer contact with her because we used to go to Gandhiji often. And probably being in Gandhiji's camp or Congress Camp we came closer in the All India Women's Conference. 1931 was the first time when I met her and since then till her death we used to meet very often. In the All India Women's Conference also we used to sit together and work together. We had actually drafted our Charter of Women's rights together. It is signed by me - because I was President- by her and by Lakshmi Menon.

Interviewer: We know her best as one of the loyalist followers of Gandhiji. But would you say that in her own rights she had qualities of leadership and greatness. If so, how would you explain that?

Smt. Mehta: Well, she had qualities of leadership. As I said she was in the Conference and one of the leaders of the Women's movement. And the way she put up with Gandhiji, and Gandhiji was a very difficult task master showed her spirit. She had sterling qualities in her. She was there with Gandhiji for a long time till he died. As Minister of Health she took initiative and did a number of good things.

Interviewer: Compared to some of the great leaders India has thrown up recently - Sarojini Naidu and others - was she a different type?

Smt. Mehta: Yes, she was a different type.

Interviewer: Because she comes from a very different background.

Smt. Mehta: She had a princely background. She was not of the masses or intelligentsia. Mrs. Naidu was also that but she had an appeal for the masses also. But Rajkumari Amrit Kaur could hold her own against men in the way she conducted her Ministry and Ministerial affairs.

Interviewer: She was faith a Christian.

Smt. Mehta: Yes.

Interviewer: Would you say that her approach to politics was secular as Nehrus.

Smt. Mehta: Yes. I think so.

Interviewer: Or was it religion-oriented catholicism as in the case of Gandhiji.

Smt. Mehta: I would not say that. She was more secular.

Interviewer: Even in her work in the Conference she was more the modern type of secular mind.

Smt. Mehta: Yes. Of course, Gandhiji's influence was there but that was not religious.

Interviewer: I think we must take Sardar Patel in detail. Did you know him very intimately.

Smt. Mehta: Again I met him in 1930 when I was the dictator in Bombay.

He was President of the Congress. He used to come to Bombay. I knew him because he belonged to Ahmedabad and I knew his brother also, Vithalbhai Patel, but not personally, I knew about him. I also had come into contact with him because our organisation in Bombay - Bhagini Samaj had invited him once. But my actual contact was when he was the President of the Congress. And I was in Bombay Working as President of the 'War Council' or whatever you call it.

Interviewer: How did he compare with other great men - he worked with Nehru and Gandhi. Was he of a different type?

Smt. Mehta: He was of a different type. He was an executive person - a man who acted, who organised. He was a very great organiser, a very great administrator. He would be able to function under a good leader like Gandhiji, of course, whatever Gandhiji said, it was Sardar who carried out his ideas and so on. They made a very good pair. The same with Panditji. And Sardar and he made very good pair in the sense that Panditji had ideas but Sardar had to execute them. He was a very good administrator, of course, He also had foresight, and he was a good statesman, I would call him that. For example, the way he handled the Princes was really wonderful.

Interviewer: Good tactician also.

Smt. Mehta: Yes, and he knew the people, - and

he could judge people. That was his great asset.

Interview: Later when he was the Home Minister, do you think there is any truth in the feeling which some people have, that he was a little uncompromising as far as some communal issues were concerned?

Smt. Mehta: I could not tell you that-because I did not know much about that. He had his strong points and he had his strong views also. There might be differences of opinion, but once the policy was decided he would carry out the same faithfully and loyally.

Interviewer: What about Mr. Kher who was the Chief Minister in Bombay when you were also with him?

Smt. Mehta: About Mr. Kher, I knew him as a social worker before he became the Chief Minister of Bombay. It was almost accidental that he became leader, all of a sudden, of the Congress party there. Everyone thought that it would be Munshi or Nariman.

Interviewer: That is, his choice as Chief Minister.

Smt. Mehta: It was quite accidental. Greatness was thrust upon him more or less. But he was able to hold his team.

Interviewer: He was a good captain.

Smt. Mehta: He was very sincere in whatever he did. That is how the Ministry was able to do much at the time.

Interviewer: What was his own contribution to good government there in addition to holding the people.

Smt. Mehta: Honesty, sincerity, honesty first. Those were the two great qualities. Hard work also. He was a people's servant. He had no arrogance about him, people had access to him and he was sociable.

Interviewer: If I may go back to Sardar Patel he was a practising lawyer and well-known Barrister. What do you think attracted him to the national struggle and especially Gandhiji's leadership?

Smt. Mehta: I don't know whether you have read his biography but he used to laugh at Gandhiji at one time.

Interviewer: Are you referring to Mr. Punjabi's book?

Smt. Mehta: There are so many books, in Gujarati also. He used to laugh at Gandhiji. He used to chide Gandhiji for his idiosyncracies. I believe it was after the Champaran Satyagraha that Sardar joined him. He felt that what Gandhiji was doing then was the right thing. If you want to fight a foreign power you have to act in some way. I think that must have attracted him because there was 'action'.

Interviewer: Many of the other things that Gandhiji preached or stood for - one feels was not of very great attraction to Sardar Patel?

Smt. Mehta: No, I don't think so.

Interviewer: I think it was more a question of

'This is the man who can win the freedom for us'. Was it in that sense that he followed him?

<u>Smt. Mehta:</u> Yes.

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